

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

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FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8013
INFO AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

C O N F I D E N T I A L KABUL 3948

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, PINR, AF

SUBJECT: THE NEW AFGHAN CABINET: COMMERCE MINISTER, ABDUL
QADUS GHORBANDI

1. ON APRIL 27, GHORBANDI EMERGED FROM AN OBSCURE OFFICE IN THE CIVIL AIR AUTHORITY TO TAKE OVER THE MINISTRY OF COMMERCE. "THEY (THE AIR AUTHORITY) DIDN'T LIKE ME, SO THEY PUT ME IN THE BACK OFFICE IN CHARGE OF SEARCH AND RESCUE," HE TOLD ME DURING MY CALL ON MAY 14. THE NEW MINISTER IS A PERSONABLE MAN, IN HIS EARLY-TO MID-40'S, WITH A SHOCK OF GRAYING-BROWN WAVY HAIR AND A FACE AS POCK-MARKED AS THE LUNAR SURFACE FROM SOME EARLIER BOUT WITH A FIERCE SKIN DISEASE -- ACNE OR SMALLPOX. HE RECEIVED ME AND MY EC COUNSELOR WARMLY AND HOSPITABLY FOR A HALF-HOUR ESSION IN HIS OFFICE AT THE MINISTRY.

2. GHORBANDI DESCRIBED HIMSELF AS A MARRIED MAN WITH THREE CHILDREN, AGES FROM 17 TO 10 (WITH A FOURTH ON THE WAY), AND A VETERAN OF 23 YEARS' SERVICE WITH THE AIR AUHTORITY. HIS TRAVELS ABROAD HAVE BEEN LIMITED TO A 15-MONTH FAA AIR CONTROLLER COURSE IN THE US, VISITS OF A FEW DAYS' EACH TO WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES "ON THE WAY," AND A SEARCH AND RESCUE SEMINAR IN THAILAND SOME YEARS BACK. HIS
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ENGLISH IS VERY GOOD.

3. I TOLD GHORBANDI THAT MY EMBASSY HAD ENJOYED A CLOSE WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COMMERCE MINISTRY FOR YEARS. I SAID THAT WE WISH TO SEE THIS RELATIONSHIP CONTINUED SINCE WE FELT THAT, IN THE LONG RUN, INTERNATIONAL TRADE WAS EVEN MORE IMPORTANT THAN AID TO DEVELOPMENT. I ALSO

STRESSED THAT WHILE OUR TRADE WITH, AND INVESTMENT IN, AFGHANISTAN WAS RELATIVELY MODEST, ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN OUR PRIVATE FIRMS AND AFGHAN ENTERPRISES -- MOST NOTABLY THE PAN AM/ARIANA RELATIONSHIP -- SHOWED CLEARLY THE MUTUAL BENEFITS WHICH COULD FLOW FROM SUCH JOINT EFFORTS. IT WAS OUR HOPE, I SAID, THAT NOT ONLY WOULD EXISTING ARRANGEMENTS NOT BE ABROGATED BY THE NEW GOVERNMENT BUT, RATHER, THAT THEY COULD BE ENLARGED AND EXPANDED. GHORBANDI REPLIED THAT THE NEW GOVERNMENT INTENDED TO REMAIN FLEXIBLE AND NOT TO REJECT ANYTHING OUT OF HAND WHICH WOULD PROMOTE THE WELFARE OF THE PEOPLE. THIS IS OUR MAIN AIM, HE SAID, AGAINST WHICH ALL ECONOMIC ACTIVITY WILL BE MEASURED. WHEN I SPECIFICALLY ASKED ABOUT NATIONALIZATION, HE ANSWERED WITH A PARAPHRASE OF TARAQI'S RESPONSE TO SIMILAR QUESTIONS AT HIS PRESS CONFERENCE OF MAY 6: "WHAT IS LEFT TO NATIONALIZE?" HE DID NOT EXPECT TO TAKE OVER THE IMPORT/EXPORT BUSINESS ENTIRELY, ALTHOUGH THE GOVERNMENT WOULD REGULATE TRADE POLICY CAREFULLY AND MANAGE SOME OF THE MORE SIGNIFICANT ITEMS, E.G., EXPORTS OF RAISINS AND NATURAL GAS AND IMPORTS OF PROJECT RELATED CAPITAL GOODS. HE HAD ALREADY MET WITH LOCAL BUSINESSMEN TO REASSURE THEM IN THIS REGARD.

3. IN ANSWER TO MY QUERY, THE MINISTER SAID THAT A NEW DEPUTY MINISTER HAD BEEN SELECTED BUT NOT YET ANNOUNCED OFFICIALLY, AND THAT HE EXPECTED TO REPLACE ONLY THOSE
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PRESIDENTS OF DEPARTMENTS WHO WERE NOT MAKING A CONTRIB-
UTION. THERE WAS ALSO, HE ADDED, "MUCH CORRUPTION"
IN THE OLD REGIME AND THIS WOULD HAVE TO BE WEEDED OUT.

4. COMMENT: GHORBANDI MAKES A PLEASANT IMPRESSION, BUT, OVERALL, STRIKES ME AS A LIGHTWEIGHT. MY ATTEMPTS TO DRAW HIM INTO SUBSTANTIVE ECONOMIC DISCUSSIONS MET WITH LITTLE SUCCESS, ELICITING LITTLE MORE THAN SLOGANS OR QUOTES FROM PRESIDENT TARAQI. EVEN CONSIDERING THE FACT THAT ALL CABINET MEMBERS ARE NEW TO THEIR JOBS, IT SEEMS DOUBTFUL, IN THE EXTREME, THAT GHORBANDI'S LONG EXILE TO A QUIET NOOK IN THE AIR AUTHORITY HAS EQUIPPED HIM TO RUN ONE OF HIS COUNTRY'S KEY MINISTRIES.
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